



# UfSO: (a)history

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### A-History of the UfSO

For the uninitiated, UfSO is an acronym for the University for Strategic Optimism. Initially, it was the University of Strategic Optimism, but whoever made the logo got it wrong and we decided the mistake was better anyway. USO, our original acronym of choice, was already taken by the United Services Organisations, a not-for-profit that aims to raise the morale of US soldiers, as well as being the stock market abbreviation for United States Oil fund. Besides, we thought, better to be for optimism than of it: better to be Bruce Willis in Die Hard than some golden-haired child born under auspicious signs. And, as we were forced to remind some professorial poetry pontiff who introduced us with a certain amount of disdain at a conference, a strategic optimism needn't contradict a felt pessimism.



### Merry Capitalism

In any case, we were asked if we might do a history of the UfSO for this, the education-themed inaugural issue of Argos. While it initially seemed like a good idea, when I began to think about how this might be done it appeared less so. My main unease with attempting to historicise the UfSO comes from my experience of the brief yet bombastic blip that was the student movement in the UK. I am also conscious of the commitment this journal has to a sense of place, and that that place is elsewhere to my own (although not entirely, given the homogeneity of neo-liberal agendas internationally and the globalising natures of the Euro-American model of the university).<sup>1</sup> I neither want to bore you with the internecine beef of an experience local only to us, nor to engage in the auto-asphyxiating self-historicising practices that characterised the movement here. Only to say this, that the engorged desire of many student activists to transcribe their actions into history as they happened stifled the movement by providing a sense that everything had already been done, that resounding applause already greeted our performance on the world-historical stage. (Even in quite practical terms, this often made it quite hard to get at deserving doors and windows because of the sheer number of cameras trying to record any petty vandalism for profit and posterity.)

1. In the UK, Argos is the name of a large chain of stores with a similar product range to The Warehouse, the difference being that goods are viewed via phonebook-like catalogues, then item codes transcribed from a digital box onto a betting slip and taken to a cashier. You then wait, not unlike Odysseus' dog, for an unspecified period, before your new toaster or whatever is brought to a counter, the waiting being the worklessness of the whole operation, presumably.

# classroom consciousness

1. A police tactic of 'containment': surrounding protesters in one area, often for hours, waiting for them to freeze, starve, implode and generally get put off demonstrating.

## A History of the UfSO – A Memoir

The revolution brings fine weather. Maybe. This wasn't a revolution but it was a beautiful day nonetheless, a really beautiful day, it was the beginning. Everyone was pretty angry, but joyful with it. We didn't know each other then, weaving in and out, bumping into each other, coming together, then apart again. A huge crowd, far bigger than anyone had forecast, tumbled and roared and bowled through the streets. I can still feel the lift in me, a rush, when I remember the sound of it—chest puffed out, fists clenched, throat open. Sky ablaze in blue, people clambered over bus stops and fences, this felt like a mob, it sounded like one. A few of us happened to be there, when it came through, the text: 'They've occupied the Tory HQ'. Smiles flashed around. 'No wait, they got the wrong building! They're gonna try the other one'. Quickly racing down Millbank in the opposite direction to a few thousand puzzled faces, beaming under a sea of DIY cardboard and marker constructions. We drew up gasping, a couple of dozen, shouting. One of our esteemed professors, still not out of protest grad school at that point, produced an egg and snapping back his arm, sent it spattering across the entrance with a comedic pop. Half a dozen wide-eyed cops shifted nervously.

Then it went off, like a fucking rocket. The crowd swelled from nowhere, and then swelled some more, must have been three, four, five-thousand, more. And we stormed it, we fucking stormed it. Upon a sparkling lawn of shattered glass, I saw friends emerge from the ransacked shell, stepping under a theatrical curtain of shard and scraps, hanging down on shreds of a ruined plastic backing. And we stood next to some blazing office furniture that'd been dragged out into the courtyard and torched. Someone handed me a cider. That was fun.

But it didn't really start then, it was after, back at base camp, an appropriated conference table on a campus where we came and went as we pleased. No ID scanning in those days. We made up a name, a blog, a plan. Not much to it, just an email shout-out to a few good people, and word of mouth. Someone did a recy, drew up the plans of a bank on a big board and pointed at it with a stick, its mystery location only revealed last minute. This felt exciting, and the footage was great. It was real lift, a feeling of optimism, it was a triumph as far as we were concerned. If it had gone badly, who knows if it would have been all over in a flash.

The desire to 'heroise' the present is distinctively modern, we are told.<sup>2</sup> Yet now the virility of the heroism of the present is measured in like-counts, retweets, reposts, references, and other regurgitations. The radical past can only be accessed in flattened and posterised form, all is leveled for exchange with the present—please complete a Captcha™ before commenting so that we know your avatar is linked to a real . . . . This isn't a criticism of social media; UfSO has a Twitter account, a blog, a Facebook page (probably), although the pub remains our dearest form of social mediation. The point is that what someone had for lunch, their feelings about this or that TV show, becomes the benchmark for what constitutes something worthy of historification. The present, the energy of the present, becomes stifled by the need that it must be recorded so that kudos can be tallied and awarded. The sustenance provided by being part of an active movement becomes dreary, as any immediacy suffers immediate representation.

2. Foucault, Michel, and Paul Rabinow. 'What is Enlightenment?' In *The Foucault reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1984]), p. 40.

I want to argue that, although the UfSO's primary medium was video that hoped to become viral, our attempt was not to fabricate a history book for ourselves, one that we would of course feature in heavily. Instead of attempting to concoct some narrative that picks a path through heady times, I want to have a critical look at what I now think we were doing then, if that makes any sense, and reevaluate whether there is anything that might be of strategic use to us now that the movement here has whizzed round the room making a farting noise before flopping on to the floor. By us, here, I mean more broadly those of us inside institutional education in some way or another, who, faced with attacks on a system that was far from perfect to begin with, find ourselves navigating the vicissitudes of a position best described as: in (defense of), against, and beyond.

To ensure that I am at least constant in the contradiction of myself, I will begin by giving a brief blurb on the UfSO as no doubt most readers will never have heard of us. The back of our collectively written attempt to troll the genre of the student handbook gives our bio as follows:

The University for Strategic Optimism is a nomadic university with a transitory campus, based on the principle of free and open education, a return of politics to the public, and the politicisation of public space.



The Tesco Lecture

So we gave the proverbial finger to a bank, in more eloquent, theoretically couched terms, but not too much theory, it was praxis. We gave the finger to Tesco, we held a conference in a kettle<sup>1</sup>—a place that felt more like a medieval battlefield as certain of the throng managed to storm the treasury. Recollections of taking a piss in the centre of Parliament Square flood back, looking up at spires, brittle with a spiteful pretense at those same, false architectural claims to authority the church had been heaping on us for centuries. Now it was eclipsed in thick red and black smoke, cold air humming heavy with bass. Another horse charge repelled with a phalanx of twisted fences. Someone poked the establishment in the ribs with a sharp stick.

A favourite was the storming of Lewisham Town Hall on a Tuesday evening or something, when our local council met to vote through the massive cuts to local services, including closing down seven libraries. The police turned up with horses and dogs as the pensioners joined the fight. Someone swung on a chandelier and chased away the mayor, someone was taking trophies from the cops, but it was all over in time for a few pints before bed. It felt like the revolution was coming, for about five minutes, but the pub still kept in business. Another fond memory was the party we held at the university to repulse a speech-giving Tory from the premises, an exuberant occasion. 'Tory Scum Fuck Off' read one banner, as we burst through the locked doors to the reception, and calmly snatched the wine that someone had tried to hide under the tables of the VIPs, just as some others hauled the sound system up the stairs. It seemed that we did a lot of storming things in those days. That didn't really last.

We kicked a conspiracy nut out for an explosion of dubious gender politics, a few more fairweather friends fell by the wayside, but from there on in it felt like a professional operation, tight. Invites poured in, but there was a self-sustaining energy. Occupations came and went, all good until someone fell off the roof trying to get sexy after drinking a bottle of whiskey. From half a dozen London galleries trolling our inbox, to university talks, conferences and radio shows, our smattering of viral videos seemed to wear us thin with some mysterious kudos. The movement was over and culture was desperate to catch up for a piece of the (in)direct action. Radical chic. Someone stuck us in the New York Times fashion supplement. From Goldsmiths conferences, where the wine was good at least, to Chelsea art 'happenings', where it wasn't so great, we followed the offers where they'd pay cash, which we could use to buy megaphones, paint and other important armouries. That Chelsea show was good for that, and we'd fobbed them off with an old, cut-up colouring book, a copy of Capital and a few dozen cocktail sausages.

After occupying this or that library, a government department seemed a plausible target. To sell Tory pornos with monopoly money, cultural capital to the suits of the Free Free Market Market would be easier than expected. Someone dressed up as a clown and a swing band cringed along to 80s hair metal, blockading the exit to the weekend. Some like-minded strangers in New York set up an international branch and carried out like-minded interventions. Dazed, Vice, The Guardian offered us column inches; we fed them half-truths and rolled our eyes in embarrassment. Was this what selling out feels like? Or are we furthering 'our cause' (I have no idea what that is, short of full communism). At the apex of the student movement, someone even wanted to put us in the Museum of London, along with other 'protest artifacts'—seems the Tower isn't how it's done these days. That was one offer we politely ignored.

To date, the UfSO has operated as a framework for the collective production of political activity, as a space for study, discussion and collective writing, as well as delivering a course of performative lecture interventions in public spaces ranging from banks to supermarkets.<sup>3</sup> In more day-to-day terms we were a group of students and progressively left—although progressively less and less—academic staff. We formed after the protest that had seen the headquarters of the Tory party smashed up in response to their announcement that they would be tripling university fees and cancelling an allowance that enabled children from under-privileged families to attend school. Our initial decision about how we could contribute to the movement, and how we could organise against the attacks on higher education, led us to temporarily re-appropriate one of the bailed-out banks as a classroom. We collectively wrote a lecture that was given by one of our newly tenured UfSO Profs, arguing for a strategic optimism in the face of the state sanctioned pessimism of austerity. Capitalism was failing and flailing, the situation looked promising.

Importantly for the point I would like to make, nothing was worked out completely at the level of theory. We theorised on the fly in a kind of makeshift way that was in constant negotiation with our differing viewpoints and the limitations of our concrete context. This type of theorisation I would call something like 'crude theory', a basic tool-kit or a pocketknife, as opposed to the 'trash theory' expounded by those Young-Girls over at Tiqqun.<sup>4</sup> Banks had been bailed out by the public, and universities faced funding cuts to help pay for it, we would use the bank as a classroom. Being and Time this is not; Brecht on a bathroom wall gets closer to my intended meaning.

Knowingly or not, the UfSO attempted to address the disorientation, political and otherwise, that is caused by the fragmentation, individualisation, and isolation that characterise life in contemporary capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Defragmentation is achieved in part by the process of becoming collective that took place through the work and play of planning actions and thinking through the conditions of our struggle. However small, the collective is caustic to fragmentation, as long as the borders of its praxis remain open. The disorientation that issues from fragmentation suggests an inability to grasp the totality, and so to position oneself within it. In a narrow sense, what I mean by totality here is the sum of social relations that anyone finds themselves connected to in any instant—thinking the totality requiring nothing short of a planetary thinking, then. Any attempt at apprehension of totality is of course a fool's gamble, an impossible and doomed dash made out of the necessity to find coordinates by glimpsing the whole. Bataille's mad laughter ringing out in the Bibliothèque Nationale provides an apt soundtrack for any metaphorical leap made from part out in to the unknown.<sup>6</sup>

The passage from the classroom—to the differently organised and political classroom—to the bank-as classroom—to the video of bank as classroom—performs a mapping function. Throwing a small pebble at the impenetrable force-field of the totality, perhaps. Yes, the pebble can be said to have a 'line of flight', but that is not what is

3. University for Strategic Optimism. Undressing the Academy: Or, the Student Handjob (New York: Minor Compositions, 2011). Download at: <http://www.minor-compositions.info/?p=272#more-272>

4. For their explanation of trash theory see: Tiqqun, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl (Los Angeles, Calif.: Semiotext(e), 2012), p. 20 – 21. Prior to this (14) they assure us, 'Listen: the Young-Girl is obviously [?!] not a gendered concept.' I'll let Jennifer Lawrence in .gif form respond: <http://imgur.com/gallery/seh6p> ('Oh yeah, [thumbs up].') Compare trash theory with crude thinking: 'Nothing is more important than learning to think crudely. Crude thinking is the thinking of great men [?!].' Bertolt Brecht, quoted in: Ronald Hayman, Brecht: a biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 182. Gender is crudely contrasted here, yet meant only in the same way as any two nouns chosen at random, say, hammer and sickle, may be differently gendered in German. Crude theory takes up the third gender, neuter, in-between and in excess of – by being multiple hence polygendered – the Young-Girl and the Great Man.

5. What follows is some sort of indigested tangle of Gayatri Spivak and Frederic Jameson. For it to become crude theory it would need to be argued about collectively as a way of orientating or informing collective action. Crude theory would be whatever survived this process. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). And, Frederic Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347 - 60.

6. Bataille below the line: librarian, numismatist, philosopher, Georges Bataille had a checkered employment history at the Bibliothèque Nationale. As the story goes, peals of his maniacal laughter would occasionally puncture the somber silence. 'I hate the image of being that is linked to separation and I laugh at the recluse who thinks he is reflecting on the world. He cannot really reflect on it because by becoming himself the centre of reflection, he no longer exists, just like the worlds that disappear in all directions. But when I realize that the universe does not resemble any isolated being that is closing on oneself but to what passes from one being to the other, when we burst out laughing or when we love one another, at that moment the immensity of the universe opens up to me and I become confused with their flight.' Georges Bataille, 'Friendship', Parallax 7, no. 1 (2001), pp. 3 - 15.

Cropping up in books and articles, we decided to write our own, 100 (very) odd pages of puns, dirty jokes and militancy, to cut through the dross in a space between the university's glossy poverty manuals and the tedious waste paper of Trots—always using the fucking same designs and slogans about 'resisting'. We could have sold ourselves as a marketing consultancy, perhaps we would if we weren't lazy. I'm joking, we did believe in it really, we just wanted to use the stuff they'd trained us in at this 'radical' art college against some of the dickheads who had already been shat out the end. So we played a few games with détournement, it was fun, on trains, in newspapers, online. We even détourned a whole occupation, declaring it a party, without an agenda, other than to blockade university finance offices and at once to both claim and decolonise the space. We wanted to offer no point of purchase. In reality we did have an agenda, but claiming that we didn't whilst releasing as many deliberately rude communiqués about the Pro Warden as possible ensured they wouldn't be able to offer us some bullshit about 'listening to our concerns'. We never did get around to leaking the files that we found, about how management 'failed to adequately monitor social networking sites' ahead of occupations.

As the blog buzzed in the wreckage of a summer's uprising, a cell of scribes cemented something that was a joy to create, together, and not just the book. Bound on the living room table, we stuffed it under the wipers of cop vans, stuck free condoms to the front and hijacked the Space Hijackers party as a clandestine book launch. That went well until we all got wasted and ended up lost in Limehouse with our designated pissed-up veteran communist in no fit state to facilitate our getaway southwards. He had a steely eye and broad grin, and walked with a stick after the cops beat him up, he'd seen worse though, when he'd fled his home after the revolution there, especially to be our godfather and supply us with cigarettes I think. Somehow we knew he wasn't a cop, though he'd always be the one to check for bugs and duck from helicopters. We were an international bunch, New Zealanders, Indians, Germans, French, Australians, Poles, Americans, Greeks, Canadians, Italians, Spanish, English, there were others, it was never really spoken of, but it made for a mix of cultural experience that only increased our energies exponentially. There was something utterly ridiculous about performing the tropes of a revolutionary organisation, but something kind of empowering about it too, as long as we remembered the humour.

There was the time we were bouncers for a prize-winning novelist, which was fine until we all showed up in black and they gave us red armbands to wear, that wasn't so funny. Or the time we attempted to do a cocktail making workshop at some twee 'protest'-themed, artsy fair at the Museum of Childhood—Molotov cocktails that is. It didn't make the cut with the curatorial team for some reason, so instead we led them on an aimless parade to nowhere, like we'd been on ourselves so many times. We got drunk, enraged a liberal journalist enough to make him smash his water glass during some panel discussion, before hastily apologising, thus spectacularly failing to make the case for his side of the stupid dichotomy between peaceful and violent. The problem with liberals is they have no understanding of the dialectic ;) We could be sweet when it suited us, giving out roses on the underground, inviting our dates to the riot.

I don't know what killed the energy. A few months on the cold steps at Occupy might have done the trick. People moving away, falling in and out of love/bed, group intrigue, minimal, but intriguing I suppose.



of interest.<sup>7</sup> The force-field makes an almost imperceptible sizzling noise, its opacity flickers as the pebble hits. We learn something. What is cognised and what is mapped is the possibility of walking out of the classroom in the service of raising the consciousness of that classroom. As UfSO fellow traveller and The Dude lookalike, Stefano Harney, puts it:

I felt I ought to have some way to be able to see that world, to feel that world, to sense it, and to enter into it, to join the study already going on in different informal ways, unforming, informing ways. I am speaking about walking through study, and not just studying by walking with others. A speculative practice is study in movement for me, to walk with others and to talk about ideas, but also what to eat, an old movie, a passing dog, or a new love, is also to speak in the midst of something, to interrupt the other kinds of study that might be going on, or might have just paused, that we pass through, that we may even been invited to join, this study across bodies, across space, across things, this is study as a speculative practice, when the situated practice of seminar room [ . . . ] moves out to encounter study in general.<sup>8</sup>

This may seem like an elaborate justification of the class trip, which is fine, but let me try to convince you from a slightly different angle.

What takes place in the otherwise, politically and collectively organised classroom as it steps out into the world in general, is the beginnings of the beginnings of the preparations for the preparations for an epistemological project that is capable of rearranging desires so that a previously impossible way of being together—communism—becomes possible. Learning how to learn to be collective through the politicised classroom, inscribed as aesthetic that hopes to become contagion. The UfSO was not a generalisable model in the sense that our structures could have handled expansion into something like a political party or even movement umbrella. Our intervention was only meant to map and enact a small move via an aesthetic that educated us while offering an idea to others. For that idea to ascend, as my friend OI' Beardo would say, from the abstract to the concrete, they would have to argue about it in their own local. That said, the air that the UfSO could breathe in was the atmosphere created by a broad radical movement. Without that we would have not only been an avant-garde without a classroom, but also a vanguard without a class. The question of organisation, which is the question of sustenance, remains to be answered. Without the types of coherence that kicked off and maintained struggle in Cairo and Quebec, our collectives can only be temporary, our lives increasingly fractured in direct relation to the increasing unity of the enemy. Learning to learn collectively remains the beginnings of flipping the whole thing on its side.

7. 'Heroism is an attitude of flight.' George Bataille, quoted in Carolyn J. Dean, 'Georges Bataille: An Occasion for Misunderstanding', *Diacritics* 26, no. 2 (1996), pp. 2-5.

8. 'Studying Through the Undercommons: Stefano Harney & Fred Moten interviewed by Stephen Shukaitis', Class War University. Online at <http://classwaru.org/2012/11/12/studying-through-the-undercommons-stefano-harney-fred-moten-interviewed-by-stephen-shukaitis/> (accessed February 8, 2013).



The stifling egos that came in and tried to co-opt us into 'serious' initiatives didn't help much, the autonomists with their nice theory but cliquy hypocrisies about 'care' that drove me to despair. We'd mainly, although not entirely, dodged Leninists and Maoists, who to be fair to them, were fairly friendly bunches in this context—history may judge otherwise. We occasionally worked alongside certain Trots, although attempting to avoid them where possible—not least because they were boring as fuck. We were 'lost children' who'd been accused of various infantile disorders, even the anarchists didn't really get us – although their poster boy took time out from speaking at German art biennales and inventing the Occupy movement to attend a few events. Then there were the militant publishers, who seemed to have been taking lessons on tedium from the SWP.<sup>2</sup> They wanted to write a pretty paper, because they could, they had a retro printing press. It was a nice idea, and it looked 'radical', but after a few issues caught the militant mood of a moving moment, there remained no content that anyone really gave a shit about enough, or even really felt part of. It died, stifled in boredom, a necessary if utterly failed experiment in trying to organise the spontaneity. Another academic exercise. I never wanted to work in publishing. A least the 'marketing' stuff was fun, that was always our strong point. We could have made a lot of money out of this—testament to my comrades, no one really did, yet.

**2. The Socialist Workers Party—a.k.a. a UK-based bunch of boring, bureaucratic, delusional, struggle-appropriating, control freaky, anti-democratic, 'deep entryist', rape-apologist Trotskyites.**

In the above memoir, I tried to tell it like it was, like it is. Capitalism is the disease that infects both you and us—we were an antagonistic symptom, a bit like an embarrassing rash, and made no pretence to be a cure. Understand such symptoms and we, and you, may be further on our way to finding what was good and what was fucked up in all this, in turn better able to think and act out our next moves in this ongoing war.

